

A WEDDING AND A KILLING

into my office and I'll make you forget all about that slimy world you work in now."

She allowed him to lead her into his office. "As long as we're discreet about it."

"Does that mean no selfies allowed?" He closed the door.



"I get why we invited David and Chelsea," Mac Faraday told Archie while staring up into his Audi SUV's rear view mirror. "They're our witnesses. Molly is coming because she's Chelsea's service dog, so she has to be here. What I'm having trouble understanding is why we invited *him*."

A long whine came from the back seat of Mac's black SUV.

Archie Monday, the love of Mac's life, turned around in her seat to look back at Gnarly. His tall ears rested back flat against his head. The German shepherd focused his attention on the church building belonging to the parking lot where they were waiting. "Mac, Gnarly's a member of the family and I want him to be here. This is the most important day in our lives and we can't not include him. It'd be like leaving our son at home while we were joined in holy matrimony."

"I did not sire him," Mac said. "I inherited him from my birth mother, who had adopted him. So, if anything, he's my brother."

"Well, if you're going to look at it that way," Archie said, "if your half-brother David can be at our wedding, then your adopted brother should be allowed."

Once again, Gnarly uttered a low whine that grew in volume until it crescendoed into a loud bark. Turning away from the window, Gnarly climbed across the center console to get up into the front seats.

“Oh, yeah, this is going to be a nice little ceremony,” Mac muttered while pushing against the hundred pounds of fur and claws depositing hair and drool on his new shirt and khaki slacks.

“Gnarly, what’s wrong with you?” Archie grabbed Gnarly’s collar to pull him back, but he was too strong. “You’re getting dog hair all over my dress.” Desperately, she tried to brush Gnarly’s black and tan fur off her white outfit. Dark strands clung to the lacy overlay.

Refusing to back down, Gnarly wedged his body in between the steering wheel and Mac.

“Gnarly, I’m going to kill you!” To save the seat upholstery from Gnarly’s sharp claws, Mac threw open the door. The German shepherd was in such a hurry to get out that he didn’t give his master a chance to escape before plowing over Mac to send him out the door and flat on his back on the pavement. Landing on all fours at a full sprint, the dog charged across the parking lot.

“Oh, dear Lord!” Archie threw open her door and ran to the driver’s side where Mac was sprawled spread-eagle on the ground.

Turning his police chief cruiser into the parking lot, David O’Callaghan slammed on the brakes to keep from hitting Gnarly as the dog darted up to the church’s main entrance.

He was still catching his breath when Chelsea pointed to where Archie, clad in a white summer dress, was kneeling next to Mac. “Did he have a heart attack?” Without waiting for him to park, she unclipped her seatbelt and jumped out of the cruiser to run over to Archie and Mac. Molly leapt out after her.

Gnarly was running back and forth in front of the church.

“Mac, are you okay?” Archie begged while clutching his hand.

A WEDDING AND A KILLING

Concerned for the fallen man, Molly was sniffing Mac all over in search of some way she could offer her service.

Chelsea knelt next to him as well. "What happened?"

"Gnarly," Archie answered her before turning back to Mac, who was trying to sit up onto his elbows.

"What's going on?" David demanded of them. "Do I need to call for an ambulance?"

"I don't know. He's not saying anything." Chelsea urged Molly to stop sniffing and lie down. "Mac, did you hit your head? Why don't you say something?"

"Because," Mac shot Archie a glare, "the only thing I can think to say right now, I can't say in front of ladies and on church property." He accepted David's offer of his hand and rose to his feet.

"Maybe Gnarly's nervous because he thought you brought him here for an exorcism," David joked.

"Protestants don't do exorcisms," Chelsea responded.

"Actually, some do," a feminine voice countered from behind them. "The Church of England does as a matter of fact."

Archie rushed over to hug the woman parking her bicycle in the bike rack. During the melee, they had not noticed her enter the parking lot via the bike path along the lake. "So Archie Monday is finally getting married," she said. "I guess since I'm the one doing the ceremony, you should introduce me to the lucky guy."

"Of course." Beaming, Archie led her over to where Mac was waiting with David and Chelsea. "Mac, I'd like you to meet Reverend Deborah Hess. She's the pastor here at Spencer Church."

A few years older than Archie, Deborah Hess did not look like a church pastor. Having grown up a Catholic, Mac had expected a Protestant version of a nun—an older woman who avoided cosmetics or anything that would be considered

glamorous. In comparison to the Catholic nuns he had known as a child, Deborah was slender with silky chestnut colored hair that fell to her shoulders and was dressed in a vibrant turquoise pantsuit.

The reverend took Mac's hand into a firm grip and smiled at him. "Mac Faraday. Your mother was a dear friend of mine. It is a pleasure to meet you." She studied his face. "You have her smile."

"My mother came to church?" Mac asked her before jokingly adding, "I didn't know you let murder mystery writers in."

"I've read all of your mother's books," the pastor said. "Robin Spencer brought Archie here after hiring her as her research assistant and editor. The Spencer family has a long history with us. Your ancestors built our original chapel and started this church well over a hundred years ago. Your grandparents and most of your ancestors on the Spencer side were married here. They have always been big supporters."

"That's why I insisted on us getting married here," Archie said. "It's what Robin Spencer would have wanted." She turned to the pastor. "Since Mac only inherited his birth mother's estate a few years ago, he's still learning about his family history."

"I don't know if you heard about Robin's story," Mac said. "She had me out of wedlock when she was an unwed teenager. My adoptive parents had told me that I was adopted, but I didn't know who my birth parents were until after Robin Spencer's death and she had left her estate to me."

"I can imagine what an adjustment a lifestyle change like that can be for a homicide detective," Deborah said, "to suddenly come into an unbelievable fortune from a world famous murder mystery writer."

"At least he now knows where his talent for solving mysteries come from," Archie said.

A WEDDING AND A KILLING

“What about your birth father?” Deborah asked. “Do you know about him?”

Mac and David exchanged a long glance. Their identical blue eyes, inherited from their father, met. If Deborah looked closely at them, she would have noticed that the two men had the same tall slender build and attractive features. Years older, Mac had dark hair, inherited from his birth mother, while David’s hair matched that of his birth mother, the late Patrick O’Callaghan’s wife.

“He passed away before I could meet him,” Mac said.

“I’m so sorry,” the pastor said.

“So am I.”

“Well,” Deborah said, “I knew your mother quite well, and I can tell you that she was a woman of strong faith. She always strove to be more committed to this church, and we could always count on her support when we needed it.”

Archie went on to introduce Chelsea and David, who reminded Deborah that they had met a few times before at various community events.

“Let’s go inside and I’ll show you around,” Deborah said. “Then we’ll do the ceremony. I don’t know if Archie told you, Mac, but it’s my policy not to marry couples unless they have three counseling sessions with me beforehand. However, since you are Robin’s son, and Archie assures me that you will have the formal ceremony in December, then I’ve agreed to do this on the condition that you have your three sessions before the big wedding.”

Mac fired off a glare in Archie’s direction. “No, she neglected to tell me that.”

Taking a set of keys out of her pocket, Deborah turned around and then paused when she noticed a green sedan parked under a tree in the corner of the parking lot. “Eugene’s here—” She gasped. “Oh, that’s right. He told me.”

LAUREN CARR

“Someone’s inside?” Mac asked. “I would have thought with all the barking that he would have come out to see what the ruckus was.”

“Eugene is the head of our trustees,” Deborah explained while leading them to the front door. “He’s here to count the offering. Since this past Sunday was Memorial Day weekend, no one wanted to stick around and the banks were closed yesterday. Eugene told me that he was coming in today to get the bank deposit ready.”

When she stuck the key in the lock, Gnarly tore around the corner of the building. As soon as she had opened the door a crack, he charged inside before anyone could step in. Barking and crying, he raced down the hallway of the office wing.

“What’s gotten into him?” David asked.

“He must think Eugene is a burglar,” Archie said.

“More likely Gnarly is wanting to steal the cash to buy a new bone for himself,” Mac said.

“Molly isn’t acting bonkers,” David said.

“Rub it in,” Mac muttered to him.

“Just saying,” David replied. “If that trustee is counting money, that racket is surely going to throw his calculations off.”

Gnarly was up on his hind legs digging at an office door.

“Get off the door!” Mac shouted at him while storming down the hallway to grasp Gnarly by the collar.

“Oh, that’s not going to throw off his count,” David said with sarcasm. “The guy’s probably afraid to come out because he thinks Gnarly is going to eat his face.”

“Eugene doesn’t like dealing with the public.” Deborah giggled. “The last time he answered the door, it was a church member who broke down into hysterics because she wanted a divorce. She got tears and snot all over his shirt. He had

A WEDDING AND A KILLING

to throw it away and swore never again. When he's here, he doesn't answer the door or the phone."

Gnarly yanked and pulled away from Mac until he got out of his collar and went back to the door. Whimpering, he plopped down onto the floor while gazing from the door back to Mac and then back again.

"Maybe we should knock on the door and apologize to him," Chelsea said.

"Eugene is extremely focused on his tasks," Deborah said. "Best to leave him alone." She waved for them to follow her. "Let's go into the sanctuary. I'll show you around and we can get started."

Mac tossed Gnarly's collar down the hall to where he was lying in front of the door. The dog looked dejected.

"Come on, Gnarly," Archie called to him. "Don't you want to see your daddy and me get married?"

"That animal did not come from my loins," Mac said in a low voice.

Ignoring his comment, Archie took Mac's hand and led him across the fellowship hall to the double glass doors that opened into a spacious sanctuary with a cedar paneled cathedral ceiling with log beams across the width. The wall behind the pulpit was made of stone at the base of which rested the baptismal pool.

"I always thought this was the prettiest church in Spencer," Chelsea said while squeezing David's hand.

"You should see it when the sanctuary is lit and the waterfall flowing down the rocks down to the baptismal pool is turned on," Archie gushed to Mac. "It's going to be a lovely wedding." She told Deborah, "We're going to have an evening ceremony on New Year's Eve, and want to say our vows right before midnight."

Deborah sighed. "It will be lovely, but I'm afraid we won't be able to use the waterfall."

Archie's face fell. "Why not?"

"It's broken," the pastor explained. "Two years ago. The plumbing is thirty years old and has to be completely replaced and we don't have the funds to have it rebuilt."

"Oh, I really had my heart set on the waterfall and candles," Archie said.

Molly whimpered.

As if to voice Archie's disappointment, Gnarly howled from where he was still in the office wing.

Mac cringed.

"Do you want me to put Gnarly in the car?" David asked him in a low voice.

Mac was more concerned with the disappointment on his bride's face. "How much will it cost to replace the waterfall?" he asked Deborah.

"Several thousand dollars," she replied. "They'll have to take out the stone to get back to the pipes and—"

"I'll pay for it," Mac interrupted.

Archie's eyes lit up and she tightened her grip on his hand.

"Willingham says I need more tax deductions," Mac said with a shrug of his shoulders. "If you want a waterfall at our wedding, then we're going to have a waterfall. We're only getting married twice."

"Oh, we would be most grateful, Mr. Faraday." The smile on Deborah's face stretched from ear to ear.

"Call me Mac."

"Well, Mac," she said while trying to contain her excitement over the sudden donation, "let's get you two kids married, and then we can discuss the particulars of your formal wedding ceremony in December."

Archie turned serious. "Deborah, there is one thing that we need to make clear."

"What's that?" Deborah looked from her to Mac and then to David and Chelsea.

A WEDDING AND A KILLING

“No one is to know about us getting married.” Archie grasped Mac’s hand. “You haven’t met my mother ...”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Well,” Archie paused, “if she found out that Mac and I eloped and got married six months before the wedding—without her being there ... well, she’d—things could get ugly.”

Deborah’s eyebrows rose. “Ugly?”

“I’m the only girl out of seven kids and the youngest,” Archie said. “I’m their only shot for a big, fancy wedding for their little girl. My mother will feel like I cheated her.”

“Then why are you not waiting?”

“Because we want to get married,” Mac squeezed Archie’s hand. “We’ve been together for three years and we don’t want to wait any longer to be husband and wife.”

Deborah looked Archie up and down. She cocked an eyebrow at her. “Are you pregnant?” she finally asked in a whisper.

“No!” Archie’s nostrils flared.

“Okay,” Deborah said. “I understand. We’ll do the ceremony and mum will be the word.” She whirled around and gestured toward the pulpit. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Mac and David followed her down the aisle.

When Chelsea stepped forward, Archie stopped her with a hand on her elbow. “Do I look pregnant?” she asked.

“Of course not.” Chelsea grabbed her by the arm and ushered her to the front of the sanctuary.

The reverend was instructing them each where to stand when one of the double doors opened leading into the sanctuary opened. A tall slender woman dressed in faded jeans, sneakers, and an oversized t-shirt stepped inside. “Miss Deborah, there’s a police cruiser out front. Is everything okay?”

“That’s mine,” David said. “It’s okay. We’re here for personal business.”

"I was just wondering," she went on, "because there's a big ol' German shepherd sitting outside Eugene's office and he doesn't look happy. I offered him a dog biscuit from Edna's jar but he'd have none of it."

"What's with the jar with dog biscuits?" Mac asked.

"Our office manager has a dog biscuit jar for canine visitors," Deborah replied before turning her attention to the woman at the back of the sanctuary. "Thank you, Ruth. Everything is okay. I'll be through here in a little bit and they'll be taking Gnarly with them when they go."

"Gnarly turned down food?" Archie covered her mouth with her hand. "That's not like him at all." She grasped Mac's hand. "Something must be wrong."

"Maybe he doesn't approve of our getting married." Mac asked the pastor, "Are you sure you don't want me to leave him as payment for your services?"

"Stop it, Mac," Archie admonished him.

Ruth stepped out into the fellowship hall and craned her neck to look out the window. "Edna just pulled in," she called to them. "She's great with dogs. She'll be able to figure out why he's so upset and make him feel better real fast." She went off toward the foyer and business wing.

Seconds later, Gnarly's barks could be heard in the sanctuary.

"Let's just get this over with," Mac told Deborah.

"That sounds romantic," Archie retorted.

"I'm not the one who broke the mood," Mac argued. "You did by insisting that we bring that beast hog with us to the church to get married."

"Gnarly is not a beast hog."

"He's got a criminal record," Mac said. "Just ask David. That dog is a canine delinquent."

"Don't drag me into your squabble." David held up both hands in surrender.

A WEDDING AND A KILLING

Deborah interrupted, "This is why I insist on counseling before the marriage ceremony."

"Oh, shut up," Mac blurted out before he realized what he was saying.

There was an audible gasp in the sanctuary.

As if he feared getting caught in a cross-fire, David backed away from Mac. "Now you've done it."

Deborah leveled her eyes on the couple standing before her. "I think we need to reschedule this ceremony. It just doesn't seem right." The pastor's previously congenial tone had shifted to firm and commanding.

"Nothing about this is right," Mac said. "Nothing has been right since I pulled into your parking lot and that animal trampled me."

"Are you still mad about that?" Archie said.

"Yes."

"Mac, you really need to learn to let things go."

Gnarly's barking had stopped, but Mac and Archie were too involved in their argument to notice.

"I took the afternoon off work to be here," Chelsea said. "Are you two going to get married or aren't you?"

"I know that I don't want to get married to the sound of that in the background." Mac jerked his head in the direction of the business wing.

Noticing that Gnarly's barking and howling had stopped, David asked, "Sound of what?"

Abruptly, the double doors flew open and a woman came running in. Her face was stark white and her eyes were filled with shock. Once inside the sanctuary, she stopped. Her mouth hung open while she gazed wide-eyed at each of them.

"Edna?" Deborah asked. "What's wrong?"

Clutching both hands to her chest, Edna sucked in several deep breaths.

LAUREN CARR

Wondering if the woman was having a heart attack, Mac and David exchanged glances filled with concern.

David took a step forward to suggest the stricken woman sit down. "Maybe—"

Before he could finish, she uttered an ear piercing scream that reached all the way up to the rafters to bounce and echo throughout the church. Unable to form the words to communicate the meaning behind her scream, she pointed toward the office wing.

David and Mac were the first out of the sanctuary. In the fellowship hall, they found Gnarly at the end of the hallway leading back to the offices. Seeing that he now had their full attention, he turned and led them down the hall.

Now, the office door was open.

David ran inside, halted, and held out his arm to stop Mac who was directly behind him.

At first, the office appeared like any other with a desk, computer, phone, and calculator. However, there was a big difference where this one was concerned.

This office had a man lying in a pool of blood behind his desk.